

## Portraiture, Revolutionary Identity and Subjugation: Anne-Louis Girodet's Citizen Belley

Sylvia Musto

Volume 20, numéro 1-2, 1993

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1072759ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1072759ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

### Éditeur(s)

UAAC-AAUC (University Art Association of Canada | Association d'art des universités du Canada)

### ISSN

0315-9906 (imprimé)

1918-4778 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

### Citer cet article

Musto, S. (1993). Portraiture, Revolutionary Identity and Subjugation: Anne-Louis Girodet's Citizen Belley. *RACAR : Revue d'art canadienne / Canadian Art Review*, 20(1-2), 60–71. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1072759ar>

### Résumé de l'article

En 1797, Girodet-Trioson peignait le portrait de Jean-Baptiste Belley, un Noir qui fut député de Saint-Domingue, de 1794 à 1797, à la Convention nationale. La critique de l'époque et la critique ultérieure ont interprété le tableau comme une célébration de l'abolition de l'esclavage en France (1794) et comme un symbole des idéaux de liberté et d'égalité de la Révolution française. Pourtant, ce portrait illustre un paradoxe fondamental de la Révolution : comment réconcilier la Déclaration des droits de l'homme et du citoyen avec l'engagement ferme du Gouvernement révolutionnaire de maintenir l'empire colonial? Le pouvoir considérable dont jouissaient les *leaders* noirs à Saint-Domingue après l'abolition de l'esclavage et l'incertitude croissante face à la domination française de la colonie inquiétaient Paris. Et Girodet, en créant l'image d'un nouveau citoyen noir et français, se devait de composer à la fois avec l'esprit conservateur et anti-jacobin du Directoire et avec la menace que représentaient les *leaders* noirs de Saint-Domingue. Dans le portrait, Belley se retrouve inclus dans l'élite révolutionnaire française comme député de la colonie, mais en même temps sa différence et sa marginalité s'incarnent dans la représentation elle-même. Le peintre, en manipulant subtilement le langage pictural, la rhétorique et les mythes utilisés à l'époque, représente et définit une hiérarchie raciale qui pouvait justifier le colonialisme, l'assujettissement et l'exploitation des Noirs.

# Portraiture, Revolutionary Identity and Subjugation: Anne-Louis Girodet's Citizen Belley\*

SYLVIA MUSTO, UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA

## Résumé

En 1797, Girodet-Trioson peignait le portrait de Jean-Baptiste Belley, un Noir qui fut député de Saint-Domingue, de 1794 à 1797, à la Convention nationale. La critique de l'époque et la critique ultérieure ont interprété le tableau comme une célébration de l'abolition de l'esclavage en France (1794) et comme un symbole des idéaux de liberté et d'égalité de la Révolution française. Pourtant, ce portrait illustre un paradoxe fondamental de la Révolution: comment réconcilier la Déclaration des droits de l'homme et du citoyen avec l'engagement ferme du Gouvernement révolutionnaire de maintenir l'empire colonial? Le pouvoir considérable dont jouissaient les *leaders noirs* à Saint-Domingue après l'abolition de l'esclavage et

l'incertitude croissante face à la domination française de la colonie inquiétaient Paris. Et Girodet, en créant l'image d'un nouveau citoyen noir et français, se devait de composer à la fois avec l'esprit conservateur et anti-jacobin du Directoire et avec la menace que représentaient les *leaders noirs* de Saint-Domingue. Dans le portrait, Belley se retrouve inclus dans l'élite révolutionnaire française comme député de la colonie, mais en même temps sa différence et sa marginalité s'incarnent dans la représentation elle-même. Le peintre, en manipulant subtilement le langage pictural, la rhétorique et les mythes utilisés à l'époque, représente et définit une hiérarchie raciale qui pouvait justifier le colonialisme, l'assujettissement et l'exploitation des Noirs.

From the earliest days of the French Revolution the passionately held ideals of reason and civic virtue had been intertwined with the power dimension of Revolutionary politics. After the end of the Terror in 1794, egalitarian ideals progressively gave way to new social and political hierarchies. During the early Revolutionary years portraiture had played an important role in the forging of political identities for the new leaders, based on civic virtue and self-sacrifice in the service of the State. However, with the changing political climate during the course of the Revolution, portraiture came increasingly to mark and define the configurations of the newly developing power structures. It is in this light that the present article will examine a portrait painted in 1797 by Anne-Louis Girodet of Jean-Baptiste Belley (Fig. 1), a black man who held the position of deputy to the French National Convention for the colony of Saint-Domingue from 1794 to 1797.<sup>1</sup>

Jean-Baptiste Belley was a freed slave who, before his election to the National Convention, had served as a captain and commander in the French Revolutionary Army in Saint-Domingue. He was one of the deputies representing Saint-Domingue at the session of the Convention on February 4th, 1794, when slavery was abolished in the French colonies.<sup>2</sup> Girodet painted the portrait in 1797, after Belley had lost his seat in the Convention, and shortly before he returned to the colony. The work was first shown at the *Exposition de L'Élysée* in 1797, and subsequently at the Salon of 1798, at which time it was entitled *Portrait du C. Belley, ex-représentant des colonies*, the 'C' standing for *citoyen*.<sup>3</sup> The bust upon which Belley leans in the image represents l'abbé Guillaume-Thomas Raynal, who was famous as an abolitionist, and for his *Histoire philosophique et politique des établissements et du commerce des Européens*

*dans les deux Indes*, first published in 1770.

Girodet's representation of Belley has been seen by modern critics as a celebration of the abolition of slavery in the French colonies, and as symbolizing the French Revolutionary ideals of liberty and equality.<sup>4</sup> Certainly Salon critics who reviewed the portrait in 1798 saw it as an illustration of the progress the French Revolution had brought to the situation of the black colonial population. For example, the critic M. Chaussard wrote in *Le Décadair*:

....*Debout, un homme de couleur, ex-représentant [sic] des colonies, s'appuie contre un piedestal sur lequel le buste de Raynal en marbre blanc s'élève [sic].... Que d'objets sublimes! Raynal; la liberté des negres [sic] et le pinceau de Giraudet [sic].*<sup>5</sup>

And an anonymous critic argued in the *Mercure de France*:

*C'est une idée heureuse d'avoir placé ce représentant [sic] appuyé contre le piedestal qui porte le buste de Raynal, l'éloquent [sic] avocat des hommes du couleur. S'il eut embrassé cette image, sa crée [sic], on eut pu intituler ce tableau hommage de la reconnaissance.*<sup>6</sup>

What these Salon evaluations reveal is that the portrait of Belley could be read in terms of a French national, Revolutionary identity which encompassed, unproblematically, the nation's former black slaves. However, as will emerge in the examination of this image, Girodet's representation also highlights and epitomizes the profound contradiction between the 1789 Revolutionary Declaration of the Rights of Man and the firmly stated commitment of the Revolutionary government to uphold its colonial empire, particularly in the context of emerging black Jacobinism and black aspirations to power and control in the colony of Saint-Domingue.

Figure 1. Anne-Louis Girodet-Trioson, *Portrait of Jean-Baptiste Belley*, 1797. Oil on canvas, 157.5 x 112.5 cm. Musée national du château de Versailles, Versailles.  
(© Photo R.M.N.)



As Belley's portrait has not yet been analysed in its historical context,<sup>7</sup> it is necessary to establish how the painting addressed and negotiated the imagery, rhetoric and myth which had been used to define power during the French Revolution. Due to the abolition of slavery and the ensuing changing relationship between France and Saint-Domingue, Girodet was faced with the task of defining and creating an image of a new colonial subject: an image which could serve to mediate the perceived threat to French domination in the colony. Homi Bhabha has drawn attention to the ambivalence in colonial imagery wherein, in order to establish a relationship of domination and subjugation between colonizer and colonized, the 'racial other' has been represented as a "mimic man....almost the same but not white."<sup>8</sup> In Girodet's portrait of Belley, through the ambivalent associations which the representation conjures up, the emphasis is subtly shifted away from power, to stress instead a reassurance in regard to the protection and safeguarding of French imperial and colonial interests. The image represents and defines a racial and cultural hierarchy which could justify the continuation of colonialism and the subordination of blacks.

I. L'abbé Guillaume-Thomas Raynal, upon whose bust Belley leans in the portrait, had first published his *Histoire philosophique et politique* in 1770. This work had been immensely popular, and had gone through thirty editions before 1787. However, although Raynal was celebrated as the spokesman for the liberation of the nation's slaves, his *Histoire philosophique et politique* contained only a few anti-slavery passages, and even these were in all likelihood written by aides and co-workers.<sup>9</sup> Raynal's work was, in fact, conceived with the support of the *Bureau Colonial*, and its main intention was to serve as a guide in the administration of France's overseas empire and labour force.<sup>10</sup> Indeed, an examination of a later pamphlet which Raynal also wrote for the government, *Administration sur la colonie de Saint-Domingue*, of 1785, exposes the arbitrariness in the construction of Raynal as the liberator of French slaves. In this work Raynal maintained that Africans lacked the ability to manage freedom, and he argued that until there appeared among them a Montesquieu, they would be better off working as labourers for the whites in the overseas colonies than staying in their own countries in Africa, where they would be the victims of the despotism of local rulers.<sup>11</sup> In a particularly revealing passage Raynal stated:

*Sans doute il seroit beau de n'aller chercher ces hommes stupides et féroces que pour les éclairer sur leurs droits, sur leurs intérêts et de les rendre à la nature plus libres et plus heureux....Il semble que [la philosophie et l'humanité]*

*pourroient nous pardonner également d'aller prendre sur l'autel du despotisme les plus absurdes de ses victimes renaissantes pour en faire des laboureurs.*<sup>12</sup>

Raynal's attitude toward the black slaves thus echoed the reluctance of the French *Ancien Régime* government to consider their emancipation.

The Revolution of 1789 did not effect major changes in these attitudes. Despite the exhortations of anti-slavery spokesmen, such as l'abbé Henri Grégoire, the early Revolutionary government was no more inclined toward abolition than the *Ancien Régime* had been. In 1789, the National Assembly consisted of about one thousand members, of whom one hundred and fifty were owners of colonial property; the number of those whose interests were linked to colonial commerce and administration would have been even higher.<sup>13</sup> A recommendation introduced in the Assembly in 1790, concerning the colonies, was clearly pro-slavery:

*...l'Assemblée nationale déclare qu'elle n'a entendu rien innover dans aucune branche du commerce, soit direct, soit indirect, de la France avec ses colonies; met les colons et leurs propriétés sous la sauvegarde spéciale de la nation; déclare criminel envers la nation quiconque travaillerait à exciter des soulèvements contre eux....*<sup>14</sup>

The Act of Emancipation which nevertheless ensued was less a result of Revolutionary ideals than of political exigency. France was in the end, forced to abolish slavery because of slave rebellions, begun in 1791 in Saint-Domingue, and because of threats to the French colony from Spanish Saint-Domingue<sup>15</sup> and from the British, following the French declaration of war against Britain and Spain on January 31st, 1793. The French Commissioner in Saint-Domingue, Léger Félicité Sonthonax, lacked the troops to defend the colony against the Spanish and the British, and he realized that in order to retain French control on the island he had to depend on its slave population and on a group of militant black rebels and fugitives led by Toussaint L'Ouverture,<sup>16</sup> a former slave. Therefore, in order to secure the support of the slaves and to persuade L'Ouverture's rebel army to join the French Republican forces, the Commissioner unilaterally announced the abolition of slavery on August 29th, 1793.

On February 4th, 1794 a delegation from Saint-Domingue, consisting of a white colonial, a man of mixed race and a black man—Jean-Baptiste Belley—appeared before the National Convention in Paris to demand ratification of Sonthonax's decree. The Convention, knowing that the British were an imminent threat to the colony, supported the French commissioner's ordinance and declared the abolition of slavery in the colonies.<sup>17</sup> The motion was carried

by acclamation, and the Jacobin deputy Danton proclaimed in a speech to the Convention:

*Représentants du peuple français, jusqu'ici nous n'avions décrété la liberté qu'en égoïstes et pour nous seuls. Mais aujourd'hui nous proclamons ... la liberté universelle.... Nous travaillons pour les générations futures, lançons la liberté dans les colonies, c'est aujourd'hui que l'Anglais est mort. [Applause].... En vain Pitt et ses complices voudront par des considérations politiques écarter la jouissance de ce bienfait, ils vont être entraînés dans le néant, la France va reprendre le rang et l'influence que lui assurent son énergie, son sol et sa population.... Ne perdons point notre énergie, lançons nos frégates, soyons sûrs des bénédictions de l'univers et de la postérité...*<sup>18</sup>

The freeing of former slaves and the alliance with Toussaint L'Ouverture, who was proclaimed *Lieutenant-Gouverneur* of the colony in April 1796, had seriously eroded French domination in Saint-Domingue. At this time L'Ouverture also began peace negotiations with the British without consulting the French authorities, and the British press hinted that he was about to desert France.<sup>19</sup> In Paris, spokesmen for the colonial planters in the National Convention called for restitution of order in Saint-Domingue, and demanded that the colony be put under military siege.<sup>20</sup> In response, L'Ouverture sent a letter to the Directory in November 1797, wherein he declared the loyalty of Saint-Domingue's black population to France, while warning the government against the re-institution of slavery. Evoking the avowed principles and ideals of the French Revolution, Toussaint L'Ouverture also emphasized the military power of the former slaves, and their determination to oppose violently a reimposition of slavery:

*Mais non, la même main qui a brisé nos fers ne nous enchaînera pas de nouveau. La France ne révoquera pas ses principes, elle ne nous retirera pas le plus grand de ses bienfaits...elle ne permettra pas qu'on pervertisse sa sublime morale, qu'on détruise ceux de ses principes qui l'honorent le plus...que le Décret du 16 Pluviose qui honore si bien l'humanité, soit rapporté. Mais si, pour rétablir la servitude à St-Domingue, il l'était, je vous déclare que ce serait tenter l'impossible: nous avons su affronter les dangers pour obtenir notre liberté, nous saurons braver la mort pour la conserver.*<sup>21</sup>

Figure 2. Charles-Paul Landon, *Portrait of Gabriel Honoré Victor Risnetti, Comte de Mirabeau*, 1790. Oil on canvas, 52.5 x 45 cm. In the Hamilton Collection, Scotland.

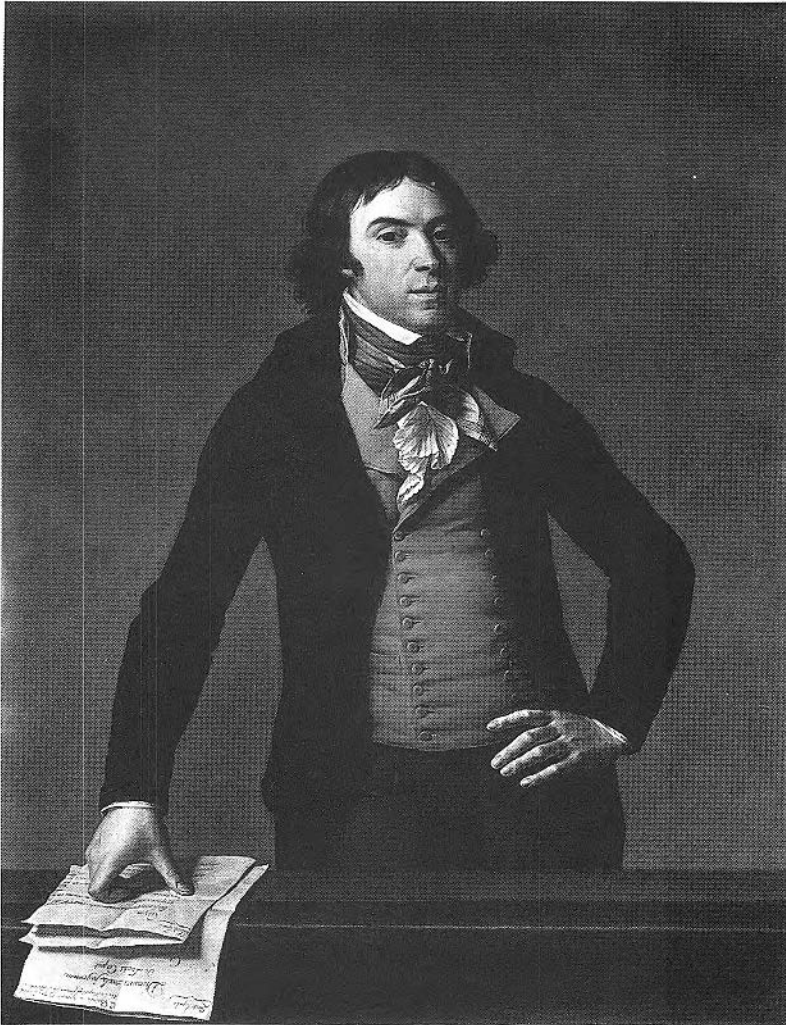


II. In response to the growing uncertainty concerning French domination in Saint-Domingue, Girodet was faced in the portrait of Belley with the task of creating the image of what would be construed by a French public as a 'responsible' political leader who would uphold French interests in the colony. In order to achieve this goal Girodet made use of—and modified—existing conventions of French Revolutionary portraiture. It is therefore revealing to examine Belley's portrait against representations of French Jacobin leaders, such as Mirabeau, portrayed in 1790 by Charles-Paul Landon (Fig. 2), and Bertrand Barère de Vieuzac, portrayed in 1793 by Jean-Louis Laneuville (Fig. 3).

After the fall of the *Ancien Régime* and the demise of the concept of the sacral state, the idea of a severe, uncompromising civic virtue became the single most important foundation upon which the new Revolutionary leaders could justify their seizure of power. Dorinda Outram, in *The Body and the French Revolution: Sex, Class and Political*



Figure 3. Jean-Louis Laneuville, *Portrait of Bertrand Barère de Vieuzac*, c. 1793-4. Oil on canvas, 129.5 x 96.8 cm. Kunsthalle, Bremen. (© Photo Kunsthalle Bremen.)



*Culture*, has shown how the French Jacobins, aiming at projecting a sense of virtue, heroism and inner self-sovereignty, created for themselves Revolutionary identities by adopting models from antiquity and from the cult of great men, and by representing themselves as physical incarnations of Revolutionary morality.<sup>22</sup> In particular, by representing themselves as controlled and restrained, the masters of their passions, the revolutionaries were able to distance themselves from overt associations with both the violence of the Revolution and the aristocratic rulers of the *Ancien Régime* who were seen to have allowed individual pleasures and investment to take precedence over government interest.

In the portrait of the deputy Mirabeau, for example, Revolutionary heroism and virtue are conveyed through allusions to antiquity. In his own political life, Mirabeau sought identification with the Roman consul Brutus, who had sacrificed the lives of his sons for the good of the State.<sup>23</sup> The portrait asserts this association by establishing

a continuity between the French deputy and classical Republican morality through the references to Brutus in the bust represented to Mirabeau's right, and in the image of David's famous history painting *The Lictors Returning to Brutus the Bodies of His Sons*, represented on the wall in the background.

Equally attesting to the controlled heroism of Revolutionary figures is the portrait of de Vieuzac, a member of the Committee of Public Safety in 1793 and 1794,<sup>24</sup> who is shown as deriving morality from the new Revolutionary law. He is portrayed addressing the National Convention, and resting his hand upon documents pertaining to the legal order of the execution of Louis XVI.<sup>25</sup> De Vieuzac's pose and bearing convey his steadfastness in the face of the Revolutionary challenge. In addition the figure, in its simple garments, is delineated clearly, evoking in a physical sense a Rousseauian discourse of truth and transparency, as expressed in the body itself. Rendered against an empty background, de Vieuzac is effectively isolated from the reality and the inherent violence of the proceedings of the National Convention.<sup>26</sup> This emphasis on both his isolation and his enunciation of the new law thus marks the deputy as the embodiment of the morality and justice of the Revolution.

These portrait representations impart to the French deputies a sense of moral right, virtue and control, justifying at once their claim to leadership over the nation. However, at the same time the images instil an impression of power and authority. In the portrait of Mirabeau, the hand resting on the documents on the desk and the swift movement of the body convey a sense of determination and active political involvement. In the portrait of de Vieuzac, the viewer is confronted with the unflinching gaze of the sitter, and the likeness imparts a notion of physical possession of power in the way de Vieuzac rests his hand on the documents of the law.

It was a common assumption in the 18th century that character traits could be read from an individual's outer appearance, bearing and behaviour. This belief was most prominently expressed by the Swiss physiognomist Johann Kaspar Lavater in his work *Physiognomische Fragmente zur Beförderung der Menschenkenntniss und Menschenliebe*, written in 1775-1778, and translated into French in 1781-1803. During the early years of the French Revolution, the theories of Lavater had been especially influential, inciting por-

traitists to concentrate their attention on physical appearance as an expression of the character of the model.<sup>27</sup> Girodet was well acquainted with the ideas of Lavater, and he was interested in strong moral characterization, which he seems to have considered the primary aim of the portraitist.<sup>28</sup> Girodet himself wrote that

*Du savant Lavater, disciple ingénieux,  
Le peintre observe aussi, d'un regard curieux,  
Le maintien, la couleur, la forme du visage;  
Distingue un sot d'un fat, un insensé d'un sage...  
Il souleve des coeurs le voile impénétrable...  
Il voit l'amour naissant de la vierge timide.  
De l'homme vertueux l'abord calme et serein...*<sup>29</sup>

and

*Souvent sans la beauté le génie étincelle;  
Dans des traits incorrects la grâce se décèle...  
Michel-Ange était laid...  
Mais cette laideur fut la laideur d'un grand homme...*<sup>30</sup>

In his portrait of Belley Girodet represents Belley sympathetically, as a tall, slender man of self-confident demeanour, his body leaning in a gentlemanly pose against the bust of Raynal. Belley's serious and thoughtful face, lined with age and experience, expresses intelligent awareness. Interpreted in the sense of Lavater's theory, Belley's calm and sympathetic features call up the artist's reference to "*l'abord calme et serein de l'homme vertueux.*" Indeed, Belley seems to be contemplating the future and the tasks awaiting him in Saint-Domingue, possibly alluded to in the landscape and the ocean in the background of the portrait. However, when Belley's image is compared with the portraits of Mirabeau and de Vieuxac it is evident that while the black representative is portrayed as possessing the virtue and dignity becoming a Revolutionary leader, he is also shown as lacking the heroism, energy and power of his political counterparts.<sup>31</sup> Three features of the image play a role here: the juxtaposing of the bust of Raynal with the figure of Belley, Belley's pose, and his dress.

Raynal's name is inscribed prominently on the bust beside Belley, and this points to his important role in the portrait. As Raynal had died in 1796, one year before Girodet painted the image of Belley, the portrait may be seen in part as a eulogy to Raynal and to his role in the emancipation of French slaves. But the representation of Raynal as an antique bust also draws attention to European civilization as an ancient heritage created over the centuries. In this context it is important to consider briefly 18th-century theories of 'racial' and cultural evolution.

The traditional theories of environmental determinism in the development of 'races' had received a more precise

'scientific' articulation in the work of Georg Leclerc de Buffon who, in his *Histoire naturelle*, published between 1749 and 1788, had developed a theory which focused on hereditary racial degeneration as caused by environment and climate,<sup>32</sup> as well as by customs and traditions.<sup>33</sup> But most importantly, Buffon's theory stressed that it would be possible for the so called 'degenerated races' to gradually return to the original, ideal condition of humankind through changes in their physical and mental environment. Significantly, according to Buffon, this development could only take place over an extended period of time.<sup>34</sup>

The idea of cultural evolution was in particular expounded by the Enlightenment philosopher the Marquis de Condorcet. Condorcet believed in a hierarchy of cultures, and he claimed in his "*Esquisse d'un tableau historique des progrès de l'esprit humain,*" of 1795: "*C'est entre ce degré de civilisation [Western civilization] et celui où nous voyons encore les peuplades sauvages, que se sont trouvés tous les peuples dont l'histoire s'est conservée.*"<sup>35</sup> But Condorcet also held that all nations, through education and progress, would eventually reach the level achieved by the 'most enlightened nations'; according to Condorcet, Europeans would convey to the rest of the world "*les principes et l'exemple de la liberté, les lumières et la raison de l'Europe.*"<sup>36</sup> However, Condorcet, in his "*Réflexions sur l'esclavage des nègres*" of 1781 (revised, 1788), had also stressed that as slavery was such an injury to human nature, slaves would need an extended period of tutelage before they could begin to exercise the responsibilities of freedom.<sup>37</sup>

Thus the antique bust of Raynal would have served as a reminder of the French "*mission civilisatrice.*" Raynal's unseeing eyes, reminiscent of those of the blind poet Homer, could have been seen to imply a sense of timeless wisdom, which would justify continuing French guardianship—and domination—over the colonies. The inclusion of Raynal's bust next to the figure of Belley could therefore have signified for a French audience in Paris the continued need—and willingness—of the overseas colony to lean on France, just as Belley in the portrait leans on Raynal.

When we turn to Belley's pose it is clear that, in contrast to the French deputies whose portraits we discussed above, he is portrayed in a leaning, sensuous pose, and that there is an overt stress on his masculine sexuality through the emphasis on the genital area, in turn enhanced by the position of his right hand outlined against the yellow *chamois* of the breeches. This attention to the genitals could be interpreted simply as denoting masculine virility.<sup>38</sup> However, in the context of 18th-century racial stereotyping, this manner of representation would also have called up the sexual proclivity and sexual excess that were problematically

Figure 4. Boyer, *Le rez-de-chaussée du foyer de la Montansier au Palais-Royal*, no date. Watercolour. Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Paris. (© Cliché Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Paris.)



but typically ascribed to blacks.<sup>39</sup> Furthermore, against the background of the Revolutionary overthrow of the ruling aristocratic class in France, the emphasis on sexuality, in conjunction with Belley's elegant and even aristocratic pose and bearing, could have evoked associations with the perceived sexual freedom and lack of restraint of *Ancien Régime* royalty and aristocracy.

Girodet's representation at one level seems to accord with the appearance expected of a dignified French citizen during the Directorial period; however, in Belley's attire there is also a subtle feeling of excess. That is, in light of dress codes of the period the deputy's costume can also be read as too new and brightly coloured, the watch at his waist as a fraction too polished, and the *chamois* of the trousers as too clinging, too velvety, and as a shade too yellow. Hence Belley's apparel serves to conjure up an impression of luxury, in contrast with his deeply serious facial features and expression. These subtle allusions to indulgence would have had the potential to call up the inclinations during the Directorial period to luxury and frivolity in dress and manners among the new bourgeoisie, and in particular among the group of young *parvenus* called the *Merveilleuses* and the *Incroyables*, who were seen to epitomize the new blurring of social hierarchies in their pretentious mimicking of the upper classes. These *parvenus* distinguished themselves by their flamboyant fashions which consisted of revealing, diaphanous dresses worn by the women, and tight breeches, long jackets with exaggerated lapels, and high-collared shirts worn by the men. The *Merveilleuses* and the *Incroyables*, as depicted in a watercolour by Boyer (Fig. 4), were not only seen as social pretenders, but were also associated with sexual licentiousness and prostitution, and were as such frequently caricatured in prints and paintings of the late 1790s.<sup>40</sup>

There is, therefore, a special irony in Girodet's imaging of Belley. In order to convey the sense of Belley's 'otherness',

Girodet, however subtly, inscribed him with the qualities which, during the Directorial period, distinguished the new 'upstart' French bourgeoisie: sensuality and a taste for luxuries. Belley, through Girodet's representation, could hence have been associated with a group of French individuals who were deemed as aspiring to, yet not having attained, a mastery of social codes. As the newly confident Saint-Dominguean black French citizens were in the process of assuming a power for which, in the eyes of the French, they were not prepared, the black deputy is imaged as being in danger of sliding into the exaggerated 'freedom' of dress and manners displayed by the Directorial bourgeoisie with their 'aristocratic' pretensions.

Moreover Girodet, while portraying Belley as a Revolutionary citizen, has included an earring. As ornament, the earring would not have belonged with the image of a distinguished French citizen, a deputy to the National Convention.<sup>41</sup> In including the earring in the portrait, Girodet followed a widespread convention—blacks, both slaves and free, were frequently depicted wearing earrings.<sup>42</sup> The emphasis on this custom must be seen as alluding to racial 'otherness' and, in the portrait of Belley, to allude to the sitter's not-too-distant past in Africa and to his early days of slavery. The earring would therefore have reminded the viewer of what was seen by many as a too-sudden emancipation and change in the status of blacks, from slaves to 'aristocracy', and would similarly have constituted a reminder to blacks in Saint-Domingue of the very recent date of their emancipation.

The significance of Belley's attire is further illuminated when the portrait is seen against the new political climate of the Directory. In this period Revolutionary virtue had lost its importance as a justification for power. The Revolutionary leaders' practice of identifying with virtue and with the Republican heroes of antiquity had become rap-



idly attenuated after the collapse of Jacobin rule in 1794.<sup>43</sup> After 1795, political leaders no longer saw themselves as virtuous embodiments of the just State, but simply as a new governing class.<sup>44</sup> As new hierarchies emerged, the imagery of political authority changed and the new positions of power came to be denoted by visible display of rank through uniforms.<sup>45</sup> An engraving of 1799 of one of the Directorial leaders, Paul Barras (*Barras in the Costume of a Director*; Fig. 5) stands as a prominent example. Here the emphasis on the costume and its opulent details is calculated to distinguish a position within a political hierarchy. In contrast, the representation of Belley, who also had held an official post in the Directory, differs significantly. Belley's tricolor sash and plume, the signs of his rank as a deputy in the National Convention,<sup>46</sup> are represented less as attributes of power, than as sensuous objects; the intricately folded silk of the sash, and the sensuously rendered feathery plumes draw attention to their material and decorative qualities, and hence lessen their authoritative impact. The implied suggestion therefore would be that the sensuous aspects of the elegant trappings of Belley's rank compete with the deeper implications involved in French citizenship and political representation.

The context of the Directory—when Revolutionary idealism and the belief in the revival of an ideal, antique past in contemporary, Revolutionary France were fading away<sup>47</sup>—has implications as well for the juxtaposing of Raynal as a Roman bust with the black deputy from Saint-Domingue. The last great festival of the French Revolution, in July 1798, was as much a celebration of Napoleon Bonaparte's victories in Italy as a commemoration of the Revolution. The Capitoline Brutus, brought as war indemnity from Rome, was displayed during the festival accompanied by the motto "Rome is no longer Rome. She belongs to Paris."<sup>48</sup> Thus, in connection with the French conquests in Europe and the political situation in the colonies, the reference to antiquity in Raynal's bust takes on a particular meaning, pertaining to the new French imperial power.

Furthermore, during the last years of the 18th century, the cult of antiquity had shifted from Roman themes to emphasize what was known as the more 'refined' Greek style.<sup>49</sup> Girodet was well-versed in the traditions of antiquity,<sup>50</sup> and he would have been aware of the different symbolic overtones in the pictorial language derived from the classical world.<sup>51</sup> Therefore the seeming eclecticism in Girodet's image, which juxtaposes Raynal's austere Roman republicanism with the elegant "Praxitelean" pose<sup>52</sup> of the figure of Belley, would not have been accidental. The opposing of two traditions of antiquity, the Republican Roman in the head of Raynal and the 'refined' Greek in the

Figure 5. H. Le Dru, *Portrait of Barras in the Costume of a Director, Year VII (1799)*. Engraving. Bibliothèque National de France, Paris. (© Cliché Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Paris.)

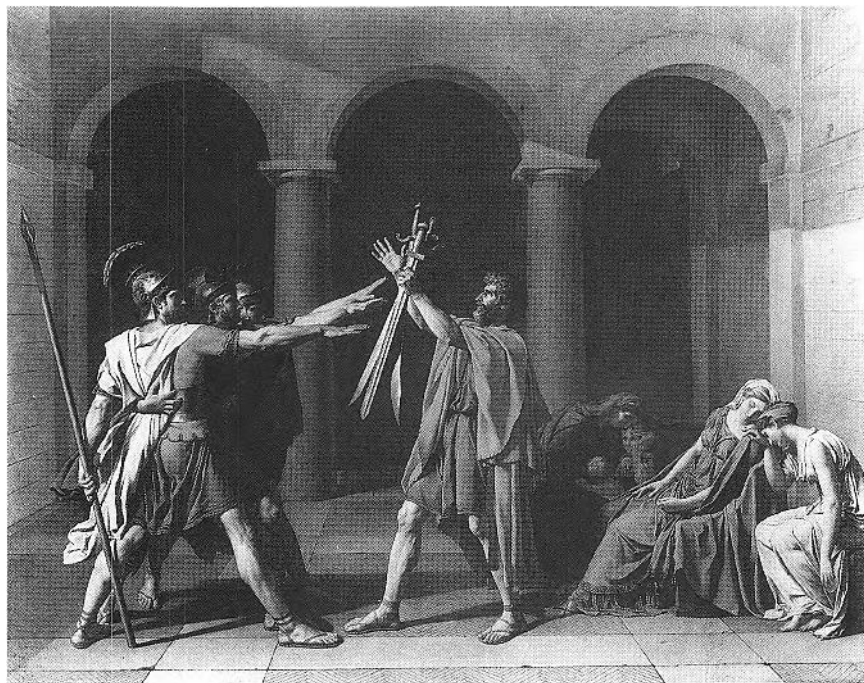


body of Belley, inscribes a sense of political difference which would have been meaningful in Revolutionary France. The Roman theme would have signified active, Republican politics—and in 1797 and 1798, an allusion to power—while the Greek reference would have had aesthetic connotations, not so directly connected with political life.

Within the framework of the discourses around antiquity, it is important to note Girodet's well known rivalry with Jacques-Louis David. Girodet, who had worked in David's studio and had assisted with David's history paintings, had endeavoured to establish himself as an artist independent of the Davidian school. Furthermore, unlike David Girodet was no Revolutionary, and although he had briefly been involved in Revolutionary activities during his stay in Rome, he was not engaged in Revolutionary politics in France.<sup>53</sup> The portrait of Belley, with its references to antiquity, may therefore also be seen as Girodet's answer both to David's pictorial language and to his Revolutionary cult of a heroic republican past.

It is also significant that a Salon critic, commenting on Girodet's portrait in 1798 in the *Journal d'indications*, remarked on the juxtaposing of the white marble head of

Figure 6. Jacques-Louis David, *The Oath of the Horatii*, 1785. Oil on canvas, 330 x 445 cm. Musée du Louvre, Paris. (© Photo R.M.N.)



Raynal with the dark figure of Belley: “*La translation du noir au blanc n’est pas ménagée [sic]; il aurait fallu ramener l’œil par gradation, ce qui aurait ajouté plus d’harmonie à [sic] ce portrait.*”<sup>54</sup> Such formal criticism, by drawing attention to what this anonymous critic perceived as a disharmonious “translation from black to white,” conjures up associations with incompatibility and opposition, which in turn disrupt the image of Revolutionary unity and equality between the French and the black citizenry of their colonies.

The lack of harmony in the “translation from black to white” may be related to the “awkwardness” which critics had seen in David’s painting *The Oath of the Horatii* (Fig. 6), of 1785. Thomas Crow, in his analysis of David’s *The Oath of the Horatii*, and of 18th-century critical responses to the painting, assesses David’s refusal to blend (“*fondre*”) and merge objects in his paintings. As Crow notes, “*fondre*” signifies the subordination of a world of distinct objects to a unified process of seeing, and he quotes an anonymous Salon critic who wrote in 1787: “*C’est par l’opposition des objets entr’eux [sic] plutôt que par ce que les peintres appellent la magie du clair-obscur [sic] qu’il cherche à produire des effets.*”<sup>55</sup> Crow argues that the word to attend to in this passage is “*l’opposition*,” and that the objects in the world David conjures up appear as opposite, separate, equivalent, without the “connecting glue of ‘clair-obscur [sic].’” And writing about the visual expression of a new, revolutionary order in David’s *The Lictors Returning to Brutus the Bodies of his Sons* (Fig. 7), Crow adds:

David can be said to have made dissonance and discontinuity into elementary constituent elements of picture making. And this is entirely appropriate to a subject which concerns political and emotional conflicts which admit of no immediate resolution. . . . *un nouvel ordre naît de l’excès du désordre même.*<sup>56</sup>

Although David’s art of the 1780s had dealt with “political and emotional conflicts which admit of no immediate resolution,” his cult of antiquity had nevertheless indicated heroic Republican ideals, and a faith in superior morality as being the catalyst for change and for the emergence of a more just and reasonable social and political order. As Crow has demonstrated, David had celebrated in *The Oath of the Horatii* and in *The Lictors Returning to Brutus the Bodies of His Sons* a new honesty and clarity sig-

nified by the ‘awkwardness’ in the representation of the figures and the composition; David had thus given form to a critique of *Ancien Régime* sensibilities and refined tastes, and indirectly of the old political regime.

Crow’s concept of the lack of “glue” which could bind the picture together is enlightening in connection with the disharmonious “translation between black and white” in Girodet’s portrait of Belley. In Girodet’s portrait, too, the unmodulated transition from black to white may be seen to signify an attempt to express in a visual language a new political climate and a feeling of the contradictions with which France was faced in the Revolutionary situation. However, in opposition to David’s radicalism, Girodet, in the context of Directorial reaction to the excesses of the Revolution, may be seen to emphasize instead the difference, the chasm between oppositional elements, and to point out, almost cynically, how unrealistic it was to believe that a new order could be born, in just one decade, from the disorder of the old. In this reading, the unharmonious “translation between black and white” constitutes in Girodet’s painting a barrier, a sign of distance, and a sign of the necessity to slow down the too-sudden breakdown of difference in status between the French and the former slaves of the colonies.

III. In light of the above, Girodet’s portrait of Citizen Belley emerges as a sign of the French desire to retrieve a form of power over Saint-Domingue for France at a time when such authority was seen to be slipping away. The image of Belley,

Figure 7. Jacques-Louis David, *The Lictors Returning to Brutus the Bodies of His Sons*, 1789. Oil on canvas, 325 x 423 cm. Musée du Louvre, Paris. (© Photo R.M.N.)

as a representation of a new identity for blacks, could serve to ensure French interests in the colony by the co-optation into French imperialist ideology of those individuals whom France now needed to use in order to secure colonial domination.

In the new political situation in Saint-Domingue after Abolition, the French could no longer exercise power over the black population through the earlier system of slavery. However, France could assert its dominance and right to leadership by subscribing to a racial hierarchy supported by 18th-century 'scientific' theories, and through the claim to be in possession of a superior civilization. In Girodet's painting French civilization is inscribed onto the body of the black deputy, but in such a way as to convey the message that the essence of that civilization is still lacking. The portrait implies that Belley is at the same time included in and excluded from a French Revolutionary elite; while he is shown as a distinguished political figure, associated with the National Convention, his difference and his distance from real political involvement are underscored.

The power which Belley's status should have conferred on him is curtailed and circumscribed in his portrayal. To follow Homi Bhabha, and to relate his insights in "The Other Question: Difference, Discrimination and the Discourse of Colonialism" to the representation of Belley, the narrative of colonial discourse inscribed onto the body of the colonized individual erases the cultural originality of the colonized and functions as a means of surveillance and control. Belley's identity and experience as a black Saint-Dominguean soldier and potential Revolutionary are erased, and he is represented as a colonial subject, whose French citizenship serves to subdue rather than liberate, leading him to support the very power by which he is subjugated.<sup>57</sup>

Belley's portrait stands not only as a reassurance regarding French domination over its colonial empire; it also transmits a sense of reassurance in regard to the question of Revolutionary and Enlightenment ethics. The universality of Enlightenment ideology and ideals was not questioned in the 18th century. It was assumed by proponents that the non-European 'races' would 'evolve', and would eventually take their place as equals alongside European peoples. What was questioned, however, was the moral



commitment of the French Revolution and of its political leaders to work toward true equality. Girodet's portrait of Citizen Belley articulated a moral justification for French imperial and colonial power—a justification which was, ironically, based in arguments provided by Enlightenment thought. The problem of what Benedict Anderson has called "the inner incompatibility of empire and nation,"<sup>58</sup> and which involved the clash of French imperialism and Saint-Domingue's aspiration to greater independence and self-rule, is resolved in the representation of Belley by a reference to racial and cultural evolution, and to the slow pace of human progress.

Belley's portrait represents an attempt to close out notions of black independence and black supremacy in 1797 and 1798, during the time of the last festival of the Revolution, and the ascendancy of Napoleon Bonaparte.<sup>59</sup> The image celebrates French civilization and its authority, and the prominent bust of Raynal serves to remind the viewer of the necessity of a period of French tutelage as a precondition for black liberty and rule. Thus Girodet's portrait of Jean-Baptiste Belley is as much a representation of French imperial expansion, as a portrait of the black deputy from Saint-Domingue.

\* This article developed out of a graduate seminar with Maureen Ryan at the University of British Columbia. I would like to thank Maureen Ryan and John O'Brian for their useful criticisms of earlier versions of this essay.

- 1 France was Europe's chief supplier of colonial produce. The prosperity of Bordeaux and Nantes derived from colonial commerce; with 465,000 slaves, Saint-Domingue was the largest and most productive colony in the Caribbean in 1789. See Robin Blackburn, *The Overthrow of Colonial Slavery, 1776-1848* (London, 1988), 163. Blackburn's work gives a detailed account of the history and politics of emancipation in Saint-Domingue. See also Hugh Honour, *The Image of the Black in Western Art. IV. From the American Revolution to World War I. 1. Slaves and Liberators* (Cambridge, Mass., 1989), 104, 106.
- 2 Honour, *The Image of the Black*, 104; Blackburn, *The Overthrow of Colonial Slavery*, 224.
- 3 According to Honour who provides an informative overview of the circumstances around Girodet's portrait of Belley in *The Image of the Black*, 104-110, it is not known whether the portrait was a commission or conceived independently by Girodet.
- 4 See, for instance, Honour, *The Image of the Black*, 110, and Thomas Crow, "Observations on Style and History in French Painting of the Male Nude, 1785-1794," *Visual Culture. Images and Interpretations*, Norman Bryson et al., eds. (Hanover and London, 1994), 149.
- 5 *Collection de pièces sur les beaux-arts (1673-1808), dite Collection Deloynes*, 63 vols. (Paris, 1980), XX, 539. The Deloynes Collection provides an archive of Salon criticism.
- 6 *Collection Deloynes*, XX, 538.
- 7 In addition to Hugh Honour and Thomas Crow, whom I have already mentioned, George Lévitine, in his *Girodet-Trioson: An Iconographical Study* (New York and London, 1978), and George Bernier, in his *Anne-Louis Girodet; 1767-1824* (Paris and Bruxelles, 1975), have discussed this image without an adequate assessment of French Revolutionary ideology.
- 8 Homi Bhabha, "Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse," *October*, 28 (Spring 1984), 127-130.
- 9 Daniel Whitman, "Slavery and the Rights of Frenchmen: Views of Montesquieu, Rousseau and Raynal," *French Colonial Studies*, 1 (1977), 25, 29.
- 10 For a detailed analysis on Raynal and the French colonial administration, see Michèle Duchet, *Anthropologie et histoire au siècle des lumières: Buffon, Voltaire, Rousseau, Helvétius, Diderot* (Paris, 1971), 130-135, 171-176.
- 11 Whitman, "Slavery and the Rights of Frenchmen," 29.
- 12 Raynal, cited in Whitman, "Slavery and the Rights of Frenchmen," 29.
- 13 Blackburn, *The Overthrow of Colonial Slavery*, 167.
- 14 Recommendation introduced by the member of the National Assembly, Antoine Barnave, and quoted in Léon Deschamps, *La Constituante et les colonies: la réforme coloniale* (Paris, 1898), 306.
- 15 The eastern half of Saint-Domingue was occupied by the Spanish, and the western half by the French.
- 16 Various spelled Toussaint L'Ouverture, Toussaint Louverture, and Toussaint-Louverture.
- 17 For a discussion of events in Saint-Domingue in 1793, see Blackburn, *The Overthrow of Colonial Slavery*, 203-217.
- 18 Georges-Jacques Danton, quoted in *Orators of the French Revolution*, H. Morse Stephens ed., 2 vols. (Oxford, 1892), 2, 281-2.
- 19 Blackburn, *The Overthrow of Colonial Slavery*, 221-239; Wenda Parkinson, *'This Gilded African.' Toussaint L'Ouverture* (London, 1978), 102.
- 20 C.L.R. James, *The Black Jacobins* (London, 1980), 192-194.
- 21 Toussaint L'Ouverture, quoted in Pauléus H. Sannon, *Histoire de Toussaint-Louverture*, 3 vols. (Port-au-Prince, 1933), 3, 35.
- 22 Dorinda Outram, in *The Body and the French Revolution: Sex, Class and Political Culture* (New Haven and London, 1989), 74-76, discusses the representation of virtue and power during the early years of the French Revolution.
- 23 Robert Herbert, *David, Voltaire, Brutus and the French Revolution: An Essay in Art and Politics* (New York, 1973), 74.
- 24 Albert Soboul, *The French Revolution, 1787-1799: From the Storming of the Bastille to Napoleon* (New York, 1975), 304-5, 420.
- 25 *French Painting 1774-1830: The Age of Revolution*, exhibition catalogue (Detroit, New York and Paris, 1975), 524.
- 26 Philippe Bordes and Régis Michel, eds., *Aux armes et aux arts! Les arts de la Révolution 1789-1799* (Paris, 1988), 121.
- 27 Bordes and Michel, *Aux armes et aux arts!*, 121.
- 28 Lévitine, *Girodet-Trioson*, 65, 304-5.
- 29 A.-L. Girodet-Trioson, "Le peintre," in *Oeuvres posthumes de Girodet-Trioson, peintre d'histoire*, 2 vols., P. A. Coupin ed. (Paris, 1829), 1, 101. See also Lévitine, *Girodet-Trioson*, 304.
- 30 Girodet, "Le peintre," 1, 394. See also Lévitine, *Girodet-Trioson*, 304-305. I have been unable to ascertain exactly when Girodet wrote "Le peintre."
- 31 Belley who was only a deputy to the Convention did not, of course, hold a position of power comparable to the positions of Mirabeau and de Vieuxac. However, as an official Salon portrait of a black deputy, the depiction of Belley would have had the potential to constitute a stereotypical image of black political leaders in the minds of contemporary French viewers.
- 32 Phillip Sloan discusses Buffon's theory regarding the development of the different 'races' in "The Idea of Racial Degeneracy in Buffon's *Histoire Naturelle*," *Racism in the Eighteenth Century*, Harold E. Pagliaro ed. (Cleveland and London, 1973), 298-302.
- 33 Michèle Duchet, *Anthropologie et histoire au siècle des lumières*, 257.
- 34 Sloan, "The Idea of Racial Degeneracy," 305, 308.
- 35 J.A.N. Condorcet marquis de, *Esquisse d'un tableau historique des progrès de l'esprit humain*, in his *Oeuvres*, A. Condorcet O'Connor and M.F. Arago, eds., XII vols., 1847-1849 (Facsimile edition: Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt, 1968), VI, 18.
- 36 Condorcet, *Esquisse d'un tableau historique des progrès de l'esprit humain*, 241.

- 37 Condorcet, "Réflexions sur l'esclavage des nègres," in his *Oeuvres*, VII, 61, 92-93; Blackburn, *The Overthrow of Colonial Slavery*, 171.
- 38 This reading is not to exclude the homoerotic aspect of the image. However, an interpretation along those lines would involve a different study, which is beyond the present scope of this paper.
- 39 For a discussion of the stereotyping of black sexuality, see, for instance, William Cohen, *The French Encounter with Africans: White Responses to Blacks, 1530-1880* (Bloomington and London, 1980), 65-69.
- 40 See, for example, Carle Vernet's impressions of the *Merveilleuses* and the *Incroyables*, in M. Charles Blanc, *Histoire des peintres de toutes les écoles: École française*, vol. 3 (Paris, 1863), 6, 11. See also *French Caricature and the French Revolution, 1789-1799* (Los Angeles, 1988), 264-5.
- 41 Outram, in *The Body and the French Revolution*, 156, discusses Revolutionary dress code.
- 42 One example is Marie-Guilhelmine Benoist's famous *Portrait d'une négresse* of 1800, in the Louvre, Paris.
- 43 As Outram has noted in *The Body and the French Revolution*, 87, by 1799 there was no longer a need for roles linking virtue to the just state, because individuals were no longer faced with the extreme political situations of the Revolution.
- 44 Bryant T. Ragan and Elizabeth A. Williams eds., *Recreating Authority in Revolutionary France* (New Brunswick and New Jersey, 1992), 76-78.
- 45 Lynn Hunt, in *Politics, Culture, and Class in the French Revolution* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1984), 74-86, has shown how Revolutionary design of official costume, meant to establish a new egalitarian national identity, also came to respond to the need to produce new political differentiations and hierarchies during the later Revolutionary years and during the Directory.
- 46 For a discussion of official costumes of deputies to the National Convention, see *Modes & révolutions*, Musée de la mode et du costume, Palais Galliera (Paris, 1989), 96.
- 47 Édouard Pommier, "Winckelmann et la vision de l'Antiquité classique dans la France des Lumières et de la Révolution," *Revue de l'Art*, 89 (1989), 9-20, considers the questions of Revolutionary idealism and the revival of antiquity.
- 48 Herbert, *David, Voltaire, Brutus and the French Revolution*, 118.
- 49 Robert Rosenblum, *Transformations in Late Eighteenth Century Art* (Princeton, New Jersey, 1967), 182-3.
- 50 Lévitine, *Girodet-Trioson*, 9.
- 51 See Alex Potts, "Beautiful Bodies and Dying Heroes: Images of Ideal Manhood in the French Revolution," *History Workshop Journal* 30 (Autumn 1990), for an explication on the tension between austere, political republicanism and aesthetic idealism in Revolutionary representations derived from classical models.
- 52 Robert Rosenblum, *19th Century Art*, (New York, 1984), 65, refers to Belley's pose in Girodet's portrait as "Praxitelean."
- 53 Lévitine, *Girodet-Trioson*, 25, 96-106.
- 54 *Collection Deloynes*, XX, 541.
- 55 Thomas Crow, "The Oath of the Horatii in 1785: Painting and Pre-Revolutionary Radicalism in France," *Art History* I (1987), 460-1.
- 56 Crow, "The Oath of the Horatii in 1785," 466.
- 57 See Homi Bhabha's discussion on colonial subjugation in "The Other Question: Difference, Discrimination and the Discourse of Colonialism," *Out There: Marginalization and Contemporary Cultures*, Russell Ferguson *et al.*, eds. (Cambridge, Mass., 1990), 73.
- 58 Quoted by Homi Bhabha in "Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse," 128.
- 59 Slavery was restored in the French colonies in 1802, during the Consular regime.